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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS

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SUBJECT: FOREIGN MINISTER SAYS GSL PREPARED TO RETURN TO
TALKS WITHOUT PRECONDITIONS

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr., for reasons 1.4(b,d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Foreign Minister Samaraweera confirmed to Ambassador Blake that the Sri Lankan government was "absolutely" committed to resuming peace talks without negotiations. He appeared troubled by signs that international support for the government was flagging because of reports of serious human rights violations by government security forces. He asked for help for Sri Lanka in overcoming these deficiencies. Ambassador assured him of continued U.S. support. However, Ambassador warned that the military appeared to be responding disproportionately to Tamil Tiger provocations and urged the government to exercise greater restraint. Both agreed that the framework for cooperation between Sri Lanka's major southern parties offered the best chance in years to develop a viable peace offer to the Tamil population. The Foreign Minister said that President Rajapaksa had asked his expert committees to develop the elements of a peace proposal before November 27. End summary.

¶2. (C) Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera indicated that President Rajapaksa had asked him to seek reassurances from the Ambassador about continued U.S. support for the Sri Lankan government (GSL). The Minister expressed Sri Lanka's appreciation for the role the U.S. has played over the years, and especially the contributions of the Secretary, Under Secretary Burns, and Assistant Secretary Boucher.

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Samaraweera thought U/S Burns' statement during his visit to Sri Lanka had led the Tamil Tigers (LTTE) to return to the negotiating table. He also thanked the Ambassador for the balance he had brought to the debate.

¶3. (C) Samaraweera noted a change in LTTE tactics: since the EU listed them as a terrorist organization in May, they had capitalized on some of the government's shortcomings to wage a highly effective propaganda war. Samaraweera said he regretted some of the recent incidents that have cast discredit on the GSL, saying they had occurred because of the

pressure the government and security forces were under. Still, he affirmed, the government much be above reproach and cannot sink to using the same tactics as a terrorist organization.

14. (C) The Minister said these recent failures of the government should not "cloud the overall picture of what the government is trying to do." He complained about the Norwegian statement on the shelling of civilians in Vakarai, saying that the GSL thought some of the language was "unnecessary," such as the suggestion that the government had again deliberately targeted civilians. (Note: the Minister did not mention the Embassy's own statement on the same incident.) Friends "should not try to solve such issues through the media." Ambassador noted that the U.S. had issued strict guidelines and trained its troops in Iraq to avoid civilian casualties and suggested that this kind of restraint could be a model for Sri Lankan forces. Samaraweera agreed, "even if civilians are being used as human shields."

15. (C) Samaraweera related that he had participated in the memorial service of assassinated Tamil MP Raviraj, and that it was the eleventh funeral of a moderate Tamil he had attended. The U.S. and other partners should not merely criticize the government, he said, but should help them investigate and improve their human rights record. He told Ambassador that Scotland Yard had agreed to help in the investigation of the murder of Raviraj.

16. (C) Ambassador brought up the November 20-21 Co-Chairs meeting in Washington. What message did the GSL have for the Co-Chairs? Some partners believed that there seemed to be two different governments at work. One was committed to peace; the other wanted to pursue a military victory. Can I

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tell the Secretary and U/S Burns that the government is committed to peace talks without preconditions, he asked?

GSL Ready for Talks without Preconditions

17. (C) Samaraweera responded that the GSL was "absolutely" committed to peace talks without preconditions, even if hostilities were ongoing. He told us that President Rajapaksa had asked his experts groups to finish the first draft of a constitutional model that would form the basis of a peace offer to the LTTE before November 27, the date of LTTE chief Prabhakaran's annual "Heroes' Day" speech. Samaraweera did not think there was a difference of opinion within the government, but conceded that perhaps the military tended to be "more hardline." He asked for understanding that when government forces are attacked, they sometimes have to retaliate.

18. (C) Samaraweera emphasized the significance of the agreement between Sri Lanka's two main southern parties, the President's SLFP and the opposition UNP, to cooperate on the peace process and other critical problems facing the country. He said that the commitment by the UNP to support the government on these issues represented Sri Lanka's best opportunity in many years to develop a viable peace proposal. Ambassador agreed, noting that it was also a chance to reveal Prabhakaran and the LTTE for the terrorists they are, and to attract more moderate Tamil support.

19. (C) Ambassador noted that the U.S. had cooperated with the GSL on both the military and intelligence fronts. He told the Minister that he had discussed frankly with Defense Secretary Gothabaya Rajapaksa the fact that in some cases the

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security forces had responded with disproportionate force to relatively minor LTTE provocations. He urged Samaraweera to use his influence within the government to counsel restraint

on the military. Samaraweera observed that both sides were now trying to "score points over dead bodies," but said he would ask the Norwegians to tell the LTTE the government was prepared to resume talks without preconditions. Ambassador assured him the U.S. would resist attempts to make the opening to the A-9 highway to Jaffna a precondition for talks.

¶10. (C) COMMENT: Samaraweera, who had just returned from a vacation, nevertheless appeared a bit nervous and at a loss for words at the beginning of the meeting. He gave the impression that Sri Lankan senior officials, including President Rajapaksa, were beginning to realize the extent of the recent damage to the government's international image. If that is the case, we would consider it a hopeful sign. It is also encouraging the GSL recommitted to talks without preconditions and is making progress on its constitutional package.

BLAKE